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Fans speak up for NeoPets

By Christine Boese
 CNN Headline News
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(CNN) -- In my last column I reviewed the wildly popular NeoPets.com, an online playground for virtual pets. In part two, I'm turning my column over to the real experts: avid users of the site.

The people I talked with ranged from age 8 to adults, and the grown-ups' responses were the ones that really surprised me. In my earlier column, I noted that girls enjoyed playing on NeoPets, that users were highly interactive co-creators of the site and that a subtle form of "immersive advertising" meant profits for the site without the obnoxious pestering of banner ads.

After reading that column, several adult users wrote to tell me that the NeoPets site wasn't just for kids, and some took issue with my calling the embedded ads a kind of "brainwashing" for kids.

"MommyTig," a mother of two active users who plays and builds on the site with her family, says her kids learn valuable economic lessons on the site. She also says the ad-supported areas are clearly marked and easy to avoid because there are so many other things to do.

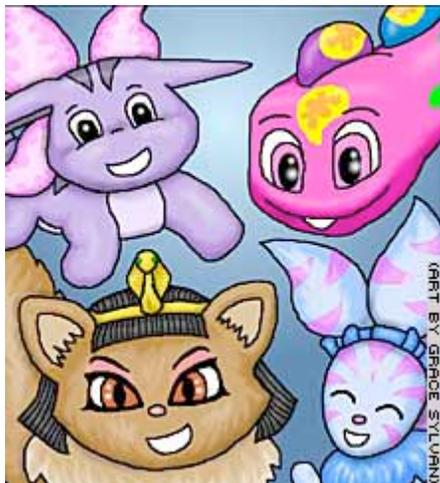
NeoPets Executive Vice President Rik Kinney said that out of 3 billion page views on NeoPets less than one half of 1 percent contain any advertising.

What do the kids say?

Of the young people who wrote in to tell me about their NeoPets experiences, enthusiasm was a constant theme. Miki M, an 11-year-old with colorful NeoPet names, held nothing back when she wrote, "I Like Everything About It !*!*!*!"

Many young users get involved in building their own stores such as the one that 13-year-old Wendy A. ("Sweetygrl") built called "Sweety Shack." In these stores, users can buy food, toys and other items to keep their NeoPets happy.

Katherine, another 13-year-old who also has a store, is active in the guilds. She wrote of finding a chatty group of fans of the elf Legolas from "The Lord of the Rings" in a guild called "Hairy Hobbit Feet." Katherine also goes to the NeoPets site from school during her free computer time.



Original NeoPets artwork by "MommyTig," a mother of two active users who plays and builds on the site with her family.

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Robin, a 10-year-old boy, says it is easier to take care of his NeoPets than the keychain pet Tamagotchi, which kept dying on him.

Most users I met heard about the site from other kids or joined because their friends were already there. Besides games and guilds and stores, some get involved in art projects and customize their pets. Others write or draw cartoons for the Neopian Times newspaper.

It does appear that "Battledome" activities (sparring matches where no one gets hurt) attract more boys than girls. Creative activities, mental puzzles, games of chance, writing back and forth with others, and competition all keep young users (and adults - even a grandmother) coming back for more.

Wild card in the deck

The creators also add an element of unpredictability to the site. Neopia has a virtual stock market, the Neodaq, and when the U.S. stock market was faltering, three Neodaq companies went bankrupt as well. Players lost all the Neopoints they had invested.

A NeoPets executive also told of a nasty fellow called the "Pant Devil," a free-roaming pair of pants that shows up out of the blue and steals all your Neopoints.

The site officers and creators said they worked hard to keep the NeoPets site as a safe place on the Internet for children because their own kids were avid users, too.

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